



University of
Chester

Quality and Standards Manual

Handbook G: Postgraduate Research Degrees

Appointment of Examiners and Conduct of Viva Policy

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1. Purpose

This policy sets out the requirements for examinations for PGR programmes and ensuring that they are carried out by appropriately qualified and appointed Examiners.

2. Components of the Examination

2.1 The Master of Philosophy or Doctor of Philosophy examination consists of the following components:

- (a) scrutiny of the submitted work by Internal and External Examiners independently;
- (b) a viva examination conducted by the examining panel, composed of Internal and External Examiners and an independent Chair during which the candidate must respond to any questions from the Examiners about the thesis or other submitted work;
- (c) where the submission involves a body of artistic work, an assessment of any relevant performances or exhibitions and/or an archive of such performances or exhibitions.

2.2 The Professional Doctorate examination consists of the components in (a) to (c) above but these must only be undertaken after the taught phase of the programme has been successfully completed.

3. Appointment of Internal and External Examiners

3.1 The University cannot appoint Examiners until the Student Administration Office in Registry Services has received the [Notice of Intention to Submit a Research Thesis](#) form from the relevant Senior Faculty PGR Tutor.

3.2 The University appoints one Internal Examiner and one External Examiner, who are approved by the Senior Faculty PGR Tutor.

3.3 The Internal Examiner is a suitably qualified member of staff of the University at the time that the thesis was submitted. Where a suitably qualified Internal Examiner cannot be found, two External Examiners can be appointed, subject to the approval of the Deputy

Registrar and the Associate Dean for PGR Studies. The academic department may have to pay the fee for the additional External Examiner.

3.4 If the candidate is a current member of the staff of the University, two External Examiners are appointed in addition to the Internal Examiner.

3.4.1 The following are defined as members of University staff: - academics, professional services, technical and support staff (including those holding honorary appointments); it does not include individuals who are primarily PGR students. The Deputy Registrar makes the final decision as to whether a candidate is a member of University staff. The candidate must submit the [Additional External Examiner Form](#) with the [Notice of Intention to Submit a Research Thesis](#).

3.4.2 If the appointment of an Internal Examiner has the potential to cause a conflict of interest, the Supervisory Team can request that no Internal Examiner is appointed. This requires the written approval of the Deputy Registrar and the Associate Dean of PGR Studies.

3.5 The External Examiner must not hold a contract of employment with the University.

3.6 An individual formerly employed by the University can be appointed as an External Examiner, if at least five years have passed since they left the University's employment.

3.7 The minimum criteria for an Examiner is:

- a qualification at doctoral level or, exceptionally, at least at Master's level where the Master's has a demonstrable piece of independent research associated with it, awarded by an appropriate Higher Education Institution, AND;
- be a subject specialist and currently research active, with a publication record which includes both recently published work and work in progress, or active involvement in on-going projects; OR be an Expert practitioner, with ten years or more of professional experience in a relevant field that includes holding an appropriate senior position, and being involved in on-going research projects (for appropriate research degrees and in appropriate subjects).

3.7.1 At least one External Examiner must have a doctorate.

3.8 Collectively the Examiners must have examined at least two doctoral theses.

3.9 Academic departments can set higher eligibility criteria, such as requiring greater experience or higher qualifications.

3.10 All Internal Examiners must have completed the mandatory online training before they are formally appointed and before they take part in a viva examination. Refresher training must be completed every 36 months.

3.11 The Student Administration Office contacts the Examiners and provides information on the conditions of appointment and their responsibilities. Examiner appointments are confirmed by Registry Services.

3.12 The Candidate must not be told the names of the Examiners until the University has formally appointed the Examiners. Once the Examiners have been appointed, the Principal Supervisor must inform the candidate of the names of the appointed Examiners.

3.13 The supervisors and candidate must not contact the appointed Examiners prior to the viva to discuss any matter connected to the examination, except for logistical arrangements.

4. Role and Responsibilities of Both Internal and External Examiners

4.1 Before the viva, the Examiners must:

- notify the Student Administration Office immediately if they can no longer act as Examiner and want to withdraw from the appointment;
- read the thesis and complete the **Independent Initial Report** (available from the Student Administration Office) in advance of the examination, identifying any concerns and giving an initial view. The **Independent Initial Report** must be submitted to the Student Administration Office and the Independent Chair at least five working days

before the viva date. The **Independent Initial Report** must not be disclosed to or discussed with the candidate or supervisors before the viva.

4.2 On the day of the viva, the Examiners must:

- meet with the other Examiner and Independent Chair on the day of the examination before the candidate is examined to:
 - agree an outline of how the examination will proceed.

4.3 During the viva, the Examiners must:

- take part in the viva examination;
- agree an outcome, with the other Examiner, using his/her knowledge and experience in order to ensure that there is consistency of standards across the University and with external benchmarks;
- act in a fair and reasonable manner and give the candidate every opportunity to explain and defend their work;
- ensure that informal feedback on the thesis and examination is given to the candidate on the day of the examination in a supportive and constructive manner.

4.4 After the viva, the Examiners must:

- Complete the **Joint Final Report** (available from the Student Administration Office) and the **Required Modifications** (if required). The Internal Examiner sends both of these to the Student Administration Office, normally within ten working days of the viva date;
- agree who will be responsible for approving any modifications required to the thesis. Whichever Examiner(s) is responsible for approving any modifications must ensure that:
 - modifications are normally reviewed and approved within twenty working days;
 - sign the **Confirmation of Completion of Modifications form** (available from the Student Administration Office) and return it to the Student Administration Office;

- treat the thesis as privileged and confidential information.

5. Role and Specific Responsibilities of the Internal Examiner

5.1 Before the viva, the Internal Examiner must:

- arrange the date and location of the viva examination, in consultation with the External Examiner(s), the Independent Chair and the candidate, and ensure that all parties are formally notified of the date, which must normally be no later than three months after submission of the thesis.

5.2 On the day of the viva, the Internal Examiner must:

- meet with the External Examiner and Independent Chair on the day of the examination before the candidate is examined to:
 - confirm the possible outcomes of the viva permitted in accordance with the Principles and Regulations governing the degree award;
 - ensure that the research degree examination, including the viva, is conducted in accordance with UoC's Principles and Regulations. If any concerns arise during the viva regarding academic integrity these shall be handled in accordance with [QSM Handbook G10: Academic and Research Integrity](#).

5.3 After the viva, the Internal Examiner must:

- ensure that an agreed Joint **Final Report** and the **Required Modifications** (if required) are produced and signed by all Examiners (except where they fail to agree);
- send the **Joint Final Report** and the **Required Modifications** (if required) to the Student Administration Office, normally within ten working days of the viva date;
- let the Student Administration Office know if they are unable to submit the **Joint Final Report** and the **Required Modifications** (if required) to it within ten working days of the viva date;
- ensure that any modifications required to a thesis or recommendations for a re-submission are sent directly to the candidate in writing, normally no later than ten

working days after the viva examination;

- ensure that recommendations regarding re-submission provide appropriate detail;
- if a re-submission is required, make themselves available to the candidate and Principal Supervisor soon after the first viva in order to clarify the recommendations made. However, the Candidate or Supervisors must not ask the Internal Examiner to review the revised work in progress, i.e. before it is re-submitted for examination;
- if modifications to the thesis are required, ensure that whichever Examiner(s) were responsible for approving the modifications have seen and approved the modifications and completed the **Confirmation of Completion of Modifications form** (available from the Student Administration Office) and sent it to the Student Administration Office. The modifications must be completed by the candidate within the timeframe specified by the Examiners (either three or six months) from the date of the formal notification of the outcome of their viva by the Student Administration Office.
- if a re-submission is required, arrange a second viva examination;
- if the Examiners cannot agree on a recommendation, prepare an independent final report and forward this to the Student Administration Office;
- engage in appropriate professional development to support their examining work.

6. Role and Specific Responsibilities of the External Examiner

6.1 The External Examiner must be rigorous in ensuring that the thesis and the candidate have been examined in accordance with the University's Principles and Regulations and any other policies and procedures.

6.2 After the viva, the External Examiner must:

- complete the **External Examiner Feedback** form (available from the Student Administration Office);
- notify the Internal Examiner about general issues about the examination. Issues can also be raised directly with the Student Administration Office in Registry Services.
- if the Examiners cannot agree on a recommendation, prepare an independent final report and forward this to the Student Administration Office in Registry Services.

7. Role and Responsibilities of Supervisory Team

7.1 The Principal Supervisor nominates the Internal and External Examiner by completing the [Notice of Intention to Submit a Research Degree Thesis](#) form.

7.2 The Supervisory Team must not attend the viva examination but can be present at the end of the viva when the Examiners inform the candidate of their recommendation and any modifications that they require, with the agreement of the Candidate and the Examiners.

8. Role and Responsibilities of the Independent Chair

8.1 The Independent Chair is responsible for ensuring that the viva examination is conducted in accordance with University regulations, policies, and procedures.

8.2 The Independent Chair is a member of University academic staff and can be a member of the same Faculty, but not of the same Department as the Internal Examiner and in which the candidate is registered.

8.3 The Senior Faculty PGR Tutor appoints the Independent Chair.

8.4 The Independent Chair must not have participated in the Annual Progress Monitoring of the student at any stage.

8.5 All appointed Independent Chairs must have completed the appropriate University training or other workshops which have been approved by the University before they take part in a viva examination.

8.6 Once appointed, the Student Administration Office in Registry Services must send the Independent Chair:

- the previous thesis, where appropriate;
- a **Viva Conduct** form (available from the Student Administration Office) for completion after the viva.

8.7 If an Internal Examiner has not been appointed, the Independent Chair and/or the Senior Faculty PGR Tutor carry out the administrative duties of the Internal Examiner.

8.8 The Independent Chair does not exercise academic judgment in the viva examination, i.e. does not participate in discussion of the thesis or the candidate or acts as academic arbiter between the Examiners.

8.8.1 The Independent Chair must not ask substantive questions of the candidate regarding defence of their thesis during the viva.

8.9 Before the viva, the Independent Chair must:

- send the completed **Independent Initial Reports** to the Internal and External Examiners as soon as they have received them.
- meet with the Examiners on the day of the examination before the candidate is examined to:
 - agree an outline of how the examination will proceed;
 - confirm the identity of the Candidate.

8.10 During the viva, the Independent Chair must:

- explain to the Examiners and Candidate the role of the Independent Chair (explaining that the role of the Chair is not that of a further examiner) and advise on the conduct of the viva;
- advise the Examiners on the possible outcomes of the viva using his/her knowledge and experience of examining research degrees in order to ensure that the process is fair and consistent;
- consider the welfare of the Candidate during the viva;
- should challenging circumstances arise during the viva, the Independent Chair must take appropriate action, which may include suspending or adjourning the viva. The Independent Chair can suspend or adjourn the viva examination at any point if a breach of the **PGR Academic Research Integrity** policy is suspected, or if they have concerns, either about the welfare of the candidate or that there are procedural

irregularities with the conduct of the assessment. The Independent Chair can adjourn the examination to further assess the situation and discuss the matter with the relevant parties. The Independent Chair can decide whether to either continue with or suspend the viva assessment. If the Independent Chair decides to continue with the viva, but later decides that concerns still exist as outlined above, they can opt to suspend the viva.

- if the Examiners cannot agree on a recommendation, the Independent Chair must advise the Examiners to prepare independent final reports and to forward these to the Student Administration Office in Registry Services.

8.11 After the viva, the Independent Chair must:

- report any significant procedural issues which occur in the viva examination to the Head of Academic Services immediately following the viva. If a viva is suspended, the Independent Chair must report the reasons as to why the viva has been suspended, including the nature of any concerns relating to student welfare or procedural irregularities in the conduct of the examination to the Head of Academic Quality and Standards (AQS). The Head of AQS decides on how to proceed with the examination;
- complete the **Viva Conduct Form** (available from the Student Administration Office) and submit it to the Student Administration Office within ten working days of the viva date. The report includes any significant problems which occurred in the viva examination (e.g. significant disagreement between the Examiners), or any general issues arising from it. This report will not normally be provided to the candidate as part of the examination process but will be made available on request in line with the General Data Protection Regulations (2018);
- treat the thesis as privileged and confidential information.

9. Role and Responsibilities of the Senior Faculty PGR Tutor

9.1 The Senior Faculty PGR Tutor signs the [Notice of Intention to Submit a Research Degree Thesis](#) form to indicate Faculty approval of the Examiners.

9.2 The Senior Faculty PGR Tutor appoints the Independent Chair.

9.3 If there is no Internal Examiner, the Senior Faculty PGR Tutor carries out their administrative duties, together with the Independent Chair.

10. Role and Responsibilities of the Candidate

10.1 The Candidate is entitled to a fair, timely and properly conducted examination and for the Examiners to be appropriately qualified.

10.2. The Candidate is responsible for their preparation for the viva.

10.3. The Candidate is examined on the material that has been submitted and the context within which the research has been conducted. The Candidate cannot submit further material after initial submission of the thesis.

10.4. The Candidate must maintain a professional and courteous relationship with the Examiners and should be prepared to receive critical feedback on their work and the viva.

10.5. The Candidate must inform their Principal Supervisor and the Student Administration Office before the viva of any exceptional or medical circumstances that may affect their ability to attend the viva examination.

10.5.1. The Candidate must notify their Principal Supervisor and the Student Administration Office of any reasonable adjustments by completing the relevant section of the [Notice of Intention to Submit a Research Thesis](#) form. More information on reasonable adjustments and the support the University can provide is available from [Student Support and Wellbeing](#).

10.6. The full thesis must be submitted to the Examiners for examination. If the candidate or their sponsor considers that elements of the thesis are particularly confidential, the candidate must inform the Student Administration Office prior to submission of the thesis, in order for the Examiners to be informed of the sensitive nature of the material.

10.7. If the candidate wants to raise concerns about the conduct of the viva examination, firstly they can raise the issue with the Independent Chair, who will advise them about the University's requirements in relation to the conduct of vivas.

10.8. If the candidate wants to appeal against the decisions of the Examiners appointed to examine the thesis, they can use the Research Degree Appeals Policy, or, if the concern does not relate to the outcome of the viva, the University's Student Complaints Procedure.

10.9 Under the General Data Protection Regulations (2018) the candidate can view all Examiner reports arising from their viva examination(s). Candidates who are recommended for their target award (subject to modifications or not) are not given copies of the Examiner reports but can request them from the Student Administration Office. Candidates who are given the opportunity to resubmit or, recommended for the award of a lower degree, will be given copies of the Examiners reports with the formal notification of the outcome of the viva.

10.10 No candidate will be provided with the Examiners' initial reports after the viva.

11. Conduct of the Viva

11.1 The default position is that vivas will take place online. However, if a student requests an in-person viva, this request should be considered by the Internal Examiner, and facilitated wherever possible.

11.2 The viva cannot be recorded.

11.3 Disability and Inclusion has produced guidance on reasonable adjustments to the conduct of the viva, which is available from [Student Support and Wellbeing](#).

11.4 The Independent Chair can begin the viva by explaining the process and the format of the viva, including formal introductions, and a brief explanation of the roles of the Independent Chair and the Examiners.

12. Outcome of the Examination

12.1 See **Outcomes of a Postgraduate Research Examination Policy**.

12.2 Although the Candidate is informed of the outcome on the day of the viva, the Student Administration Office is responsible for the formal notification, which is via email within five working days of receipt of the fully completed Examiner and Independent Chair reports and Required Modifications (if required).

12.3 If the Examiners cannot agree on an outcome of the examination, each Examiner must prepare an independent final report and submit it to the Student Administration Office.

12.4 If the Examiners have been unable to agree on an outcome, the Chair of Postgraduate Research Degrees subCommittee reviews the **Independent Initial Examination Reports** and the **Viva Conduct Form** from the Independent Chair. Consequently, and having asked advice from Academic Services, the Chair of Postgraduate Degrees subcommittee can:

- appoint an additional External Examiner to review the thesis; OR
- Require new Examiners to be appointed and the viva examination re-held.

13. Submission of Examiner Reports

13.1 After the viva, the Examiners produce a **Joint Final Report** and **Required Modifications** (if required). The Internal Examiner is responsible for submitting these to the Student Administration Office normally within ten working days of the viva date. The Independent Chair submits the **Viva Conduct Report** normally within ten working days of the viva date.

13.2 The Student Administration Office will check that the **Joint Final Report**, **Required Modifications** (if required), and **Viva Conduct Report** have been completed in full. If not, these will be returned to the Examiners and / or the Independent Chair for further work.

13.3 Electronic signatures on reports are acceptable.

13.4 If the **Joint Final Report, Required Modifications** (if required) and **Viva Conduct Report** have been completed in full, the Student Administration Office will formally notify the Candidate of the viva outcome normally within five working days.

13.5 The Student Administration Office sends the **Joint Final Report** and the **Required Modifications** (if required) to the Candidate.

13.6 Providing that it has been informed by the Internal Examiner that they cannot submit the **Joint Final Report, Required Modifications** (if required), and **Viva Conduct Report** within ten working days of the viva date, the Student Administration Office notifies the Candidate of the delay.

13.6 The Candidate can request a copy of the **Independent Initial Examination Reports** from the Student Administration Office.

14. Resubmission of a Thesis

14.1 In the case of resubmissions, a second viva will be held to allow the candidate the opportunity to defend their thesis. The only circumstances in which a second viva will not be required is if all Examiners, in their Independent Initial Exam Reports, recommend that the thesis is a straight pass; no modifications of any description can be requested in this scenario. In these circumstances the Examiners are still entitled to insist upon a second viva if they wish

14.2 After reading a modified thesis following a viva, if the Examiners decide the required modifications have not been made to their satisfaction, they can require the candidate to undertake additional work, provided that the modifications being requested are not additional to those required immediately following the viva.

14.2.1 The Examiners have the discretion to decide how many times a candidate is entitled to submit the modified thesis, whilst considering the progress made.

14.2.2 The Deputy Registrar must be consulted in all such cases.

14.2.3. The Candidate's studies will not be terminated on the first occasion they unsuccessfully submit the modified thesis following the viva examination, nor will the Candidate's studies be terminated unless they have been informed that the next submission of the modified thesis will be their final attempt. In all cases where a thesis is being returned, the candidate must be given a reasonable amount of time in which to submit.

14.3 The University's Awards Assessment Board can terminate the studies of candidates who do not submit their thesis within the maximum period of submission.

14.4 The University can terminate the studies of candidates who do not engage with the modifications or resubmission process from their programme.

15. Submission of the Final Thesis to [ChesterRep](#)

15.1 Candidates must submit the final, approved version of their thesis to the University's online research repository, [ChesterRep](#).

16. Review of External Examiner Reports

16.1 The University reviews all External Examiner reports to identify themes and trends and ensure that high academic standards are being maintained.

16.2 Registry Services reviews all External Examiner reports and submits an annual summary report of feedback to Postgraduate Research Programmes subCommittee.